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THE TICKENHILL COLLECTION

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Some Introductory Notes

by

J. Francis Parker

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Some Introductory Notes

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Most of us are conscious of the great difference between life in Britain today and that of pre-war years; this difference covers almost every facet of our lives, from small details of domestic affairs to vast alterations in the methods of production of most commodities. But probably only the older generation fully appreciate the effects resulting from the First World War, where again a revolution resulted in many human affairs.

It is important therefore to record details of these past times before all traces are lost and memories fade. Fortunately a number of people have devoted much time and energy to the preservation of relics of the ordinary life of yesteryear. Amongst these were James Frederick and Alice Parker, of Tickenhill, Bewdley, who in the space of about twenty-five years built up a large collection of folk items in their home.

This collection, eventually known as the Tickenhill Collection, began almost by accident, and its real start was preceded by a number of small events and factors which had an important bearing on the final outcome.

After Joseph Tangye, Alice Parker's father, bought Tickenhill at the sale of Crown Lands in 1873, he spent about a year altering the house before the family moved in. Part of the alterations consisted in equipping a workshop and smithy, the steam engine and boiler of which were used in the evenings to drive a dynamo built by him, and lighting arc lamps. This was one of the early examples of house lighting by electricity, and was certainly prior to 1884. The dynamo is still in existence, on loan to the Museum of Science and Industry Birmingham. The children had to keep watch on the lamps to push

the carbons together as they burned away.

Later on Joseph Tangye built Hern's Nest, a large house on an adjoining hill, where the family moved in 1884. Here again, J.T. had a well furnished workshop and smithy, and his wife made a delightful garden on the steep hillside.

In 1892 Alice Tangye commenced attending Birmingham School of Art, travelling daily by train from Bewdley. Evidence is available that she worked hard, but also made a number of life-long friends. Her two chief studies were sketching in water colours, and embroidery. This, together with the knowledge of the work her father and uncles had done was to give her later on that great appreciation of the work of country craftsmen which is such a feature of the Tickenhill Collection.

The home, Tickenhill, was steeped in history, having been a royal palace, scene of the wedding by proxy of Catherine of Aragon to Prince Arthur in 1499; the home for a short period of the Princesses Elizabeth and Mary; visited by probably both James I and Charles I; and for some years one of the Courts of the Marches of Wales. Whilst the house had suffered much through the centuries, there was a basis of the original left, and the site one difficult to better.

James Frederick Parker was born at Wolverhampton in 1878 one of nine children of George and Fanny Amelia Parker. For about eight years he was employed in a bank at Kidder-

minster, and spent much of his spare time in the Bewdley Rowing Club and Kidderminster Choral Society, which activities brought him into contact with the Tangye family. So in 1902 he and Alice Tangye were married in Dowles Parish Church, Bewdley.

After various other employments he and his brother entered business in Birmingham as iron and steel agents some time prior to 1908, which business eventually developed into the present British Rolling Mills Ltd., of Tipton. J.F. and his wife lived in Bewdley from 1905 onwards, and he travelled daily by train first to Birmingham, and latterly to Tipton.

J.F. and his wife bought Tickenhill from the executors of the late Joseph Tangye in 1920 and took up residence there in 1924 after considerable improvements to the house. In the following year Alice Parker organised an Exhibition of Medieval and Modern Arts and Crafts at Tickenhill, when items were borrowed from the surrounding district and from late students of the Birmingham School of Art. Papers were read by John Humphreys, F.S.A., on the Sheldon Tapestries, and by E. A. B. Barnard, F.S.A., on the Royal Palace of Tickenhill.

Both J.F. and A.P. were keen members of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society, and both took part in the many meetings and excursions over the years. He was Honorary Treasurer of the Society from 1925 until 1951. Another meeting place for those interested in local history was the Kidderminster Field Club, whose



excursions and meetings gave opportunity for Alice Parker in particular to show her interests. A catalogue of an exhibition held in Kidderminster by the Field Club in March 1931 lists a number of items on loan from Tickenhill.

From 1925 onwards there were many visitors to Tickenhill, many out of curiosity, but others such as the Birmingham Archaeological Society were a source of great interest and encouragement in discovering the history of the house and district. In February 1926, during work in the garden, a cannon 30 in. long was found under a path; it had been discarded hundreds of years before because of a broken trunnion.

During the industrial depression of the early thirties few people came to the house, but as the depression gradually retreated

social activities took on an added intensity, and visitors to the house were many and frequent. Amongst these were many who had an interest in history, archaeology, or art, and gradually the idea of collecting tools of the old country crafts emerged, with descriptions of the methods used. Like her father before her, A.P. enjoyed talking with the country people and hearing of the old ways of them or their forbears.

By the year 1937 certainly, the idea of forming a Folk Museum was confirmed; there are in existence three notebooks handwritten by A.P. listing additions to the collection with dates and names of donors or previous owners. One cannot assume that these lists are complete, as other things may have arrived unknown to A.P., for after a while,

especially during the war years, items came with increasing frequency.

At the end of the war the collection had grown to considerable proportions, and the work of preservation, cleaning and recording had become beyond the capacity of the owners. But the essential fact was that these things had been saved from destruction before it was too late to collect them at all! It is unlikely that a similar collection could ever be made again. By this time the museum had become fairly widely known, and so frequently people who were moving from large old family houses would invite J.F. to come and look round to see if there was anything he would specially like for Tickenhill; the general reply he gave was "let me browse in your cellars and attics; that's all I want." The result would often be a large load of odds and ends of little interest to the donors, but frequently of great value to the collection.

The Museum, as it was called by the family, reached its climax during the mid-1950's. J.F. had a happy knack of describing the various objects when showing people round that even the least interested were entertained. Retired from business, he had thrown all his great energy into collecting and talking about it; one never knew where he would be next, or what he would bring back home. The collection snow-balled; undoubtedly there were a few cases when people were glad to find a home for some of their "junk," but many items of great interest were acquired, and it became a case of the family living

amongst museum exhibits. As a consequence of handling so many curios of olden time he acquired a very extensive knowledge of relics of the past; and people as well as magazines would write to ask him to identify some object unknown to them. More often than not he found the answer.

There was a constant stream of visitors to the house, for some years touching 2,000 annually, and a visitors' book was kept, which is an interesting record of names of people from all over the world. J.F. used also to be in demand by such bodies as the Women's Institutes and Rotary Clubs, who appreciated his homely talks on long forgotten subjects. He usually took with him a number of special items which he termed "20 questions," and which he would ask his audience to identify; and very few people indeed knew them all. On one such occasion before a somewhat more serious audience he had demonstrated these items, and was putting them away in his case; there remained a small box about which he had said nothing. Someone asked, "But Mr. Parker you haven't shown us that little box," "Oh, haven't I?" said he handing it down to the questioner; upon moving a catch the questioner was surprised by the sudden appearance of a Jack-in-the-box shooting out at him. Puck was usually not far away.

The visitor entering the front door at Tickenhill immediately felt he had gone back in history several centuries; the hall, a large room mainly oak-framed by large beams made rock-hard by time,

and panelled in oak which probably furnished the chapel originally, was furnished rather fully with appropriate pieces, interspersed with such things as a sedan chair, and a lace-making stool with cushion. Above the beams were pewter plates, dishes and mugs, reminders of an old Bewdley industry. The dining room is another large room but more modern in style, probably on the site of the old private chapel. Here were musical instruments, automata, glass and china objects, and prints of old Bewdley. Here also were a suite of miniature chairs and settee, and a fine model of a sailing ship of war.

In the wing rooms were several bookcases full of history, reference, and biographical works; a tall case of lacquer ware, a large globe, spinning wheels, papier mâché trays and writing desks, colour prints of the Great Exhibition, and a small portable fire engine.

The workshop was used as a repository for the many items needing repair, and also for one of J.F.'s favourite toys, the hurdy-gurdy, which he enjoyed demonstrating. Here also were organs, hand-bells, and a clavichord, with a set of pharmacist's drawers along one wall. In the adjacent morning room were more bookcases, also shelves of pottery and clocks, and a glass case containing a series of models, ivories, miniatures, locketts, snuff-boxes, seals and filigree jewellery.

The first floor consists of about eight bedrooms, not all used as such. Over the dining room was a large room known as the King's

room, which was used as a costume display for the many fine old dresses collected by Alice Parker.

A room at the west end was used to display children's toys; there were doll's houses, doll's furniture, tops, hoops, Noah's arks, and other toys. Up a few steps from the toy room was a large room used as a dormitory by the school which rented the house early this century, and which was the principal focus of the museum. Down the centre were glass cases, and around the sides tables all full of items from domestic utensils to horn lanterns, glassware to spits, shop signs, locks, keys, writing materials, hip baths, hour glasses, hot water bottles of various shapes, goffering irons, needle-making equipment, etc.

The cellars too were put to use for display of laundry dollies, box mangles, bicycles, prams, dairy equipment, and a set of tools representing a wheelwright's shop complete with lathe turned by a boy for 1d. per day.

It was a pleasure to Alice Parker to talk to school children about the old days, and many were the parties from Midland schools who were shown the ways of our forbears. That this was appreciated is shown by the letters received after such visits.

In 1949 a number of items were lent to Messrs. Barrows Stores, of Birmingham, to create a representation of a nineteenth century tea, coffee, and spice warehouse, where a grocer had to know his goods, and to weigh them out from the bulk. The

mahogany counter was equipped with quill pen and ink to complete the effect.

Some years before he died, J.F. decided to form a Trust to take care of the Collection for the future. At his death in 1962 the Trustees were approached by the Bishop of Worcester to consider whether it would be possible to house the Tickenhill Collection in a rehabilitated Hartlebury Castle, to form a nucleus of a County Museum. This would form part of a scheme to provide a home for the Bishop, State Rooms avail-

able for the use of the public for functions, and the north wing to become the County Museum. As a result an agreement was made with the County Council, who were to be responsible for the museum, and about 30 tons of museum objects were moved from Tickenhill to Hartlebury, in addition to a large amount of material on loan to other museums. The Trustees therefore feel that the Collection is now safe for the public for the future, and that the work done at Tickenhill is not lost.

